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Oroonoko and Travel Literature: Race, Class and Gender

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Restoration & Eighteenth-Century English Literature (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)

Oroonoko and Travel Literature: Race, Class and Gender

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SUMMARY:

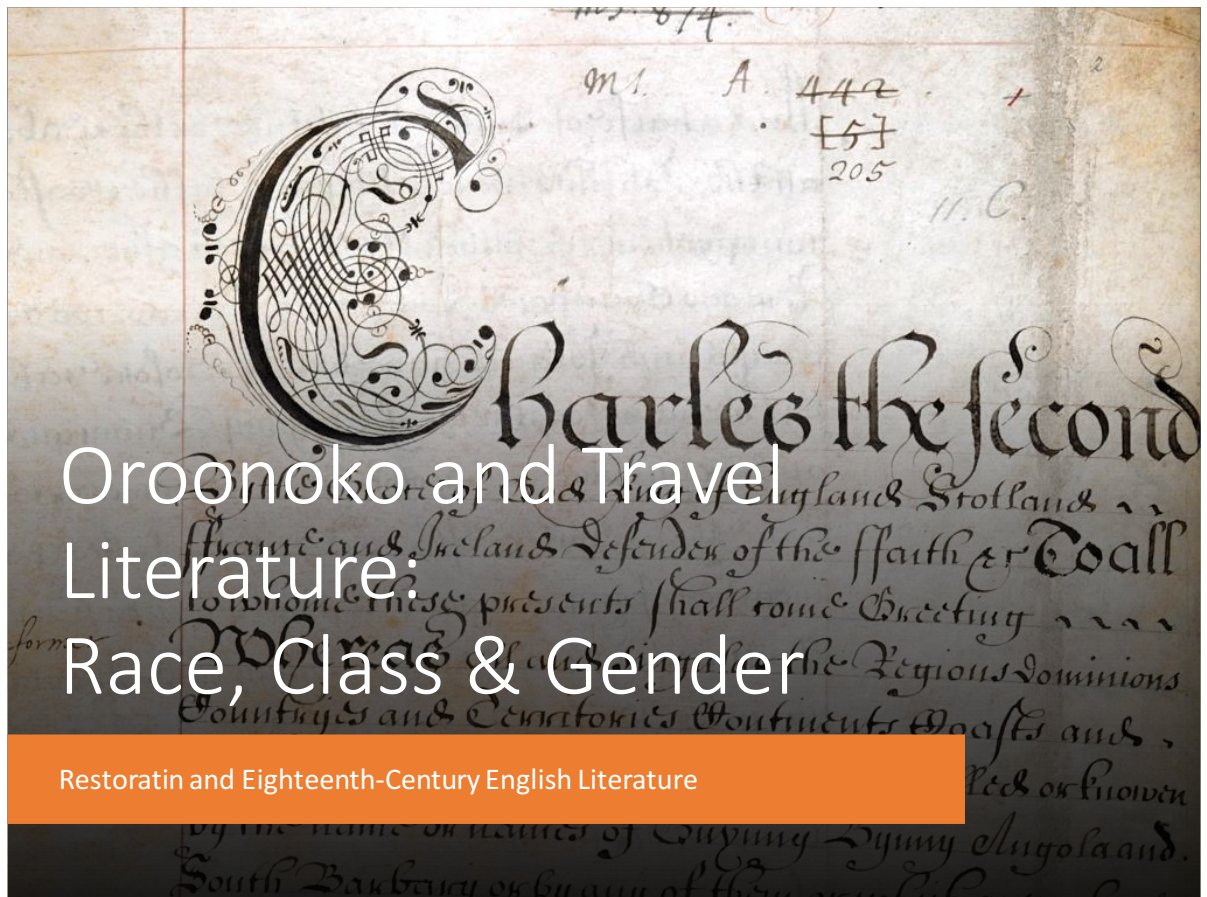
This lesson provides a brief overview into the English travel narratives of the Restoration era and the 18th century, particularly in their relation to the international slave trade. The major point in the British abolitionist movement will be mapped. The bulk of the lesson, however, concentrates on the 1688 novel *Oroonoko* written by Aphra Behn.

Topic discussed:

- English travel narratives (precursors and the 18th century)
- Basic comparison of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688)
- *Oroonoko* (characters and plot)
- Britain's involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade
- Slave (travel) narratives
- Race and gender in *Oroonoko*

1 OROONOKO AND TRAVEL LITERATURE: SLAVERY, ABOLITION, RACE AND GENDER

Double click on the image to peruse the PowerPoint presentation.




2 DIFFERENT READINGS OR *OROONOKO*

📖 & 📄 In the following paragraph Lee Morrissey offers a brief overview of the different readings of Behn's *Oroonoko*. When reading the novel, consider, how you would further support each interpretation.

For generations, *Oroonoko* was read as a sentimental, early abolitionist tract. That reading focused on Oroonoko/Caesar as the royal African unfairly reduced to the position and circumstances of a chattel slave. This interpretation overlooks, among other things, Oroonoko/Caesar's dismembering treatment of Imoinda, and both this reading and the novel fell out of favor in the twentieth century. By the 1970s, feminist scholarship had recovered both Behn and *Oroonoko* through a reading that focused on genre, gender, and the importance of Behn as an early woman writer. In this reading, the narrator's concern that Oroonoko/Caesar's "misfortune was, to fall in an Obscure World, that afforded only a Female Pen to celebrate his Fame" attracted the critical attention (40). In 1987, though, Laura Brown proposed a new approach to *Oroonoko*, situating it in its seventeenth-century high political context. Brown's contextual reading focuses on the narrator's reference to "frightful Spectacle of a mangled king" (Behn 77). In the novel, the spectacle refers to the torture of Oroonoko, but in the late seventeenth-century

context, England had a living memory of the spectacle of a mangled king, the 1649 execution of Charles the First [...] Brown treats Oroonoko as if it were historical fiction in a later, or Walter Scott sense, as if Behn were imagining in Surinam an English past and retelling a Royalist story about the execution of Charles the First, an event that had occurred four decades earlier. (2016, 12-13)

How does Brown's information reported here by Morrissey change your interpretation of Behn's effusive praise for Oroonoko? Also, could the recent events in the USA put the novel into a new/different interpretative light?

 Test your knowledge with the following quiz: [10 R18CEL](#)

3 COMPULSORY PRIMARY READINGS:

Behn, Aphra. 2018 (1688). Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature 10th edition. Volume C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by James Noggle, 139-186. New York – London: Norton.

Locke, John. 2018 (1689/1690). *Two Treatises of Government* [ch. IV. "On Slavery"]. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature 10th edition. Volume C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by James Noggle, 962. New York – London: Norton.

Johnson, Samuel. 2018. "A Brief to Free a Slave." In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature 10th edition. Volume C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by James Noggle, 979. New York – London: Norton.

Equiano, Olaudah. 2018 (1789). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature 10th edition. Volume C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by James Noggle, 980-990. New York – London: Norton.

4 SUGGESTED READING:

Lipking, Joanna. 2005. "'Others', Slaves, and Colonists in *Oroonoko*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Aphra Behn*, edited by Derek Hughes and Janet Todd, 166-187. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morrissey, Lee. 2016. "Transplanting English Plantations in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*." *The Global South* 10 (2): 11-26.